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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Syria

PARTICIPANTS: Secretary Dulles, Mr. Stassen, Ambassador Moose, Mr. Byroade, Mr. McArthur, and other members of the U.S. Embassy and General Shishakli Minister, the Syrian Washington

After the usual amenities, General Shishakli said that he would like to review certain important problems affecting Syrian policy. The exposition which he would make would not differ much from what he had in the past told Ambassador (then Minister) Cannon, Ambassador Moose, and Mr. Byroade when the latter visited Damascus last year. He said that he had asked the Foreign Minister and the Syrian Ambassador to Washington to be present so that they could hear the discussion and thus be in a position in their further discussions to act in accordance therewith. General Shishakli said that he was a military man and did not talk like a politician. He would speak frankly. He began by saying that as a result of U. S. elections last November there was great hope in Syria and the Arab world that there would be a new U. S. policy with respect to the Near East. In the past there had been a feeling of friendship and good will between the Arab people and the United States. The Arab world in general and Syria in particular liked the United States because of the democratic ideas and principles for which it stood and which had first been made clear to the world by President Wilson. During World War I the Arab world had joined the side of the Allies and revolted against the Ottoman Empire in order to gain freedom and independence. Unfortunately, following World War I the United States retired from the world scene and left the other Allies to do what they wished with the Arab world. The result of the Arabs' assisting the Allies in World War I was that they were divided up into mandates. The mandate system, instead of raising living standards in the Arab world thus making for greater Arab strength in fact, was used to exploit the resources of the Arabs and to keep them weak and divided. In World War II the Arab world also tried to help the Allies but after this war

terminated

terminated the situation remained the same as before despite Arab assistance. It was only when the Syrians finally revolted in 1945 that they gained their independence. Furthermore, instead of recognizing the legitimate aspirations of the Arab world the Western Allies assisted in the introduction of "outsiders" who had driven the Arabs from their own lands in Palestine. General Shishakli said that he blamed not only the United States and Western powers for the above situation, but also the Arab world itself.

He then said that relations between different peoples can only be built on trust and good will. The Arabs cannot do this alone. They must have the help of the United States in establishing trust and confidence. General Shishakli said that he is a realist. He sees facts as they are. He is not one of those Arabs who says that Israel does not exist. On the contrary, he recognizes that the state of Israel is a real and living thing. He does not want arms to push Israel into the sea. He wants and hopes very much that the United States will treat Arabs and Israel alike.

The United States and Syria both know the danger of Communism. Syria is spending one-half of its budget on defense instead of spending a large portion of this amount to raise living standards and thus to increase the internal defense against Communism. Syria is determined to maintain its independence. Like the United States, it will defend itself against Communism. The United States has the capability of giving economic and military assistance to Syria in order for it to remain independent. General Shishakli said that he trusted the United States as do other Syrian leaders. But these Syrian leaders must also have the trust and confidence of the Arab peoples. Syria bases its policy with respect to Israel on the United Nations decisions, one of which recognizes the existence of the state of Israel. If Israel is unwilling to recognize the other United Nations decisions it has in fact no legal basis for existence. Israel needs help to live and if she is given such help it should be specifically conditioned by Israeli observance of UN decisions relating to (1)

refugees

refugees, (2) partition of Palestine, (3) the internationalization of Jerusalem. Regarding refugees, many of them will not return to Israel and accept Israeli domination. Only a relatively few will actually wish to return. For those who remain in the other Arab states aid is needed to settle them. Regarding the partition of Palestine, Syria will not accept the "fait accompli" of further Arab territory acquired by Israel after the armistice. Regarding the internationalization of Jerusalem, Syria cannot speak for Jordan, but General Shishakli said he did not believe that Jordan would refuse such internationalization. General Shishakli concluded his presentation by saying that he understood Secretary Dulles had not come to Damascus to make any decisions or reach any definitive conclusions and he had therefore limited himself to giving a friendly and frank expose of the main problems which preoccupy Syria.

Secretary Dulles then said that the purpose of the trip was, as General Shishakli had pointed out, not to negotiate or reach definitive conclusions but to understand better the views of the Arab world and through personal contact establish that feeling of confidence which is essential if wise decisions are to be made. Furthermore, if the Arabs believe that we are interested only in Israel and are interested in a further expansion of Israel it is difficult to proceed ahead with the solution of various problems because of the distrust that would poison the general atmosphere. (General Shishakli said he believed the United States people's views had in the past been poisoned by Zionist propaganda. They believe now that a new era was about to dawn as a result of the United States elections.) Secretary Dulles said that he hoped the new United States administration will justify the confidence which General Shishakli expressed and will act in a way to inspire further confidence. He did not wish to discuss whether or not there had been mistakes in the past. It was the future to which we must turn our full attention. He said that the state of Israel does exist. The problem is to find a way to make Israel's existence compatible with peace and harmonious relations in the Near East area. Thus far Secretary

Dulles

Dulles a. Mr. Stassen had visited three Arab countries which are neighbors of Israel. He had the impression that in each of these countries there is fear that Israel and particularly extremist elements therein wish to expand the present Israeli frontiers and that Israel will be aided by the United States in such an expansion at the expense of the Arab neighbors. Secretary Dulles said he wished to give the strongest and most categorical assurance that the United States is opposed to any expansion of the existing Israeli frontiers. The United States Government would be glad to discuss with the Syrian leaders the concrete steps that might be taken to get across the idea that the United States does not favor Israel at the expense of Syria or the other Arab states.

Regarding the military assistance which General Shishakli had indicated was required, the United States must be certain that any military aid is not to be used aggressively by one state against its neighbors. The purpose of military aid is to assist countries which feel threatened to defend themselves from aggression. This means that one element related to United States military assistance is that the United States be confident that Syria would not attack Israel and at the same time to give greater confidence to Syria that Israel will not attack it. We would like to see a steady improvement of relations of all the countries of the Near East. We also hope and expect that if greater aid for the Arab countries is possible that it would eventually involve some form of regional security pact. Also, the precise details of such a pact may not as yet be clearly defined.

Secretary Dulles said that from the viewpoint of Syria the first problem in their minds is the question of Israel, whereas from our viewpoint the United States must look at the balance of power between the Soviet and non-Soviet world. Secretary Dulles expressed the hope that on the basis of the present exchange of views it might be possible to work out a program which would serve both the interests of the United States and Syria.

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He said that Syria is fortunate indeed to have only Israel as its main problem. Israel is the only problem which Syria has because United States power acts as a restraining force against the aggressive intentions of the Soviet Union. He expressed the hope that Syria would have a sympathetic appreciation of the position of the United States and he could assure General Shishakli that the United States had a sympathetic appreciation of Syria's problems. Secretary Dulles said that when he talked about the broader concept of a regional defense system he was not sure that the details suggested in the MEDO concept were the best way to bring this about. There might have to be changes in the details of this concept. He hoped that General Shishakli would consider how a Near Eastern collective defense system might be worked out and he would be very much interested in any alternate solutions which the General might propose.

General Shishakli said that he could not give any alternate proposals at this time. As the result of its own efforts, Syria no longer feared aggression. Syria had organized its army with no aid from the United States and very little from the United Kingdom with the exception of twelve jet planes which had recently been delivered. He said that further immigration into Israel would not help peace in the Near East. Furthermore, Israel gets great assistance from outside the area. In attacking the problem of regional defense it is first essential to assure security within the Near East area before trying to set up a defense system against attack from without. The Near Eastern people themselves will be the best defenders of their own territory. Before any regional defense setup can be established the Arab people must discuss this problem. Thus far the Western powers have only seriously discussed regional defense with Egypt.

Secretary Dulles said that he was discussing it now with General Shishakli. He said we are impressed with the role that Syria might play at this particular time, particularly in view of the difficulties between Egypt

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and the United Kingdom.

General Shishakli said that he appreciated the confidence in Syria expressed by Mr. Dulles, but believes strongly that the entire over-all problem must be settled at the same time. If efforts are made to set up a Near East defense organization without prior settlement of the Israeli and Suez Canal questions, for example, the Arab people would not understand and would consider that their leaders had betrayed them. Secretary Dulles said that he was not proposing at this time any specific solutions. If Syria at a time of its own choosing feels that progress can be made in any of the problems which have been discussed, the United States is most sympathetically disposed. In many problems a series of steps are sometimes required prior to an over-all settlement. In other words, it is not always possible to settle everything at once, particularly when problems are very complicated. Among the problems which must be attacked are those of stabilizing the present Israel-Arab frontiers, possibly with minor rectifications; of gradually absorbing refugees; of providing assurance against further Israeli expansion; of building greater military strength in the Arab world; and of making economic progress which will improve living standards of the people. Secretary Dulles said we can perhaps make progress on some of these specific problems without an immediate over-all solution for everything. The formal establishment of peace in the area and a collective defense system may be a matter which can only come about gradually. This does not, however, exclude specific steps toward these objectives. For example, in Israel and Jordan he had found concern over the present inflamed situation along the frontiers. He had tried to suggest ways to the Israelis and Jordanians to improve this situation along the borders. He hoped that progress would be made in this matter and in the other matters mentioned above without awaiting for a final over-all settlement. If there is anything connected with any particular of any of the problems which he had mentioned above which the

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Syrian leaders believe can cussed in the coming weeks, the United States wou. e glad to do so.

Secretary Dulles said he still had to visit a number of other countries prior to his return to Washington. He would then have to report his conclusions to President Eisenhower and the National Security Council so that they could be brought into harmony with over-all United States policy. If at that time General Shishakli thought well of the idea further discussions could be carried on along normal diplomatic channels. He wished to assure General Shishakli that we had great confidence in Syria. He had talked to the leaders of Israel, Egypt and Jordan in much the same terms with which he expressed himself today. Particularly he had stressed the need for the countries of the region working together. For example, there are various projects under way to utilize the water of the northern districts for the purpose of land reclamation. Coordinated over-all planning is necessary in this question. He would like further to assure General Shishakli that if at any time the latter wished to discuss broader projects, the United States would be very glad to have his views. We believe, however, that there may be specific projects where progress can be made in the near future.

General Shishakli said he believed that he and Secretary Dulles saw things much in the same light. It was his understanding that the United States will prevent further Israeli expansion and force Israel to comply with the decisions of the United Nations.

Secretary Dulles said that General Shishakli had not correctly understood what he had tried to say and that he had not committed the United States to enforce upon Israel the UN resolutions relating to Palestine. The idea he meant to convey was that the United States would be glad to discuss with both Israel and the Arab states ways to assure against further expansion of the Israeli frontier beyond its present limits.

General

General Shishakli said that the United States had been a power and influence to prevent further expansion and influence Israel to comply with the UN resolutions. Regarding military assistance to Syria, General Shishakli could assure Mr. Dulles that Syria was not and would not be an enemy of the United States. It was essential to get new arms quickly, since it would take time for the Syrian army to be trained in their use. If the Syrian army could be built up the United States could rely on it instead of having to think about the possibility of bringing United States forces into the area in the event of hostilities.

Regarding economic assistance, General Shishakli said that Syria needed aid and felt that some of the money spent in Europe should be diverted to the Arab states. Economic aid was essential to raise living standards and thus defend against internal Communism.

Mr. Dulles said he would like Governor Stassen to comment on military and economic aid, since he had primary responsibility in these fields.

Governor Stassen said that he had been much encouraged by General Shishakli's grasp and understanding of the relationship between economic aid and security. A sound economic foundation is essential for adequate defense. If a satisfactory over-all program can be worked out the United States would give it most sympathetic consideration. The over-all program might envisage water development and land reclamation as a means of economic improvement and also a means of assisting in the solution of the refugee problem. In giving assistance the United States as a matter of principle must be sure that there are sound economic and financial internal policies in the countries which it assists. The Mutual Security assistance program is, of course, dependent upon Congressional action. Mr. Stassen said that the United States administration had asked for a more extensive program in the Near East than in the past. The Congress will probably act on this matter in about two months' time. When Congressional action has occurred,

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we will then be in a position to talk in specific terms to the Syrians as to the related aspects of a satisfactory over-all program. Mr. Stassen concluded by again expressing his appreciation for the clarity of General Shishakli's briefing and said that it would be of great help in arriving at wise decisions.

General Shishakli said that Syria had a number of economic projects in mind, including those relating to irrigation, roads and industrial expansion. Point IV he said is only a planning organization and has not been able to make satisfactory plans. Syria has undertaken surveys at its own expense. What is needed is financial assistance. There had been some discussion of loans from the International Bank, the Export-Import Bank, and from private sources. But when aid of the kind he needs is available projects can be more seriously studied and undertaken.

Mr. Stassen said that he wished to add a further comment. There is a close relationship between United States aid and the purposes for which it is used. In other words, in extending aid there are engagements that both sides take with respect as to how this aid will be applied. Furthermore, with respect to planning, it is essential that there be sound engineering studies and plans as a basis for any program. When an over-all conclusion has been reached with respect to a program it will be possible to examine the details of how it can be worked out. In the military sphere this would mean what kind of equipment could be provided, how the training would be organized, etc.

General Shishakli said that it would not be wise to get involved in a "vicious circle" where Syria cannot receive United States aid until it gives a specific undertaking or engagement, while on the other hand Syria cannot give an undertaking or engagement until it is assured of a program which meets its requirements.

Mr. Stassen said he believed this could be made by a step-by-step approach to the problem. General Shishakli

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said that the problem was really to find a point in the circle from which to start. Thereafter mutual confidence and cooperation would increase in a rising spiral. He could assure Mr. Dulles and Mr. Stassen that there was good will on the Syrian side.

The meeting concluded with the usual amenities and expressions of appreciation.